Sanatanism, Whither Drifting?

By Mr. D. V. Siva Rao

"The caste system was supported not only by theological doctrines like karma and the transmigration of soul but also by ideas like those regarding purity and pollution had a practical bearing on life."

— *Sirdhar Ketkar, History of Caste.*

The theory of purity and pollution was developed into a science and rigid rules of life have crystalised into the law of caste and status or Varnasrama Dharma. Purity was considered to be essential for proper performance of sacrifices to the gods and ancestors and mixture of the Varnas cuts at the roots and causes destruction of everything. The commentators of Manu explained it by saying that Varnasankara spoils the sacrifices and rains will fail. Hence the fact of strict rules as to the marriage, and and adultery being made a grievous offence (Manu viii 353). Severe and almost impossible penances and cruel penalties were laid down for the transgression of these laws. Bottomless perdition awaited these sinners in the other world and social excommucation and boycott in this world, if the proper penances were not performed. Rules as to the eating of food, restrictions about the persons, places and times also point to the same ideas of purity and pollution.

CASTE RESTRICTIONS

Quite a net work of social restrictions and ceremonies were prescribed and observed, with proper sanctions to enforce them. Where the purity of blood and life was thus looked upon as something godly; there is little wonder if castes became rigid and the caste was good in proportion to the hardness of the rules of purity that were prescribed and observed. In such a state, one can very easily understand the religious and ceremonial discriminations made and the difference in treatment at court, the economic privileges varying with the status of the castes themselves. At one time it was possible to raise oneself to a higher caste but Manu laid down that in the Kali age this had become impossible. It is however possible for a person to become degraded by non-observance of the ceremonials and by association with the low and the barbarous. Just as in the case of a person so also a caste could thus be degraded by transgression of the rules.

WHO ARE "PATHITHAS"?

All these notions resulted in the coming into being of degarded castes and mixed castes. The 'Vratyas' were Sudras who fell by non-observance of the rules of Dharma and were therefore unfit for Dharma practices. Persons who The indiscriminate mixture of castes resulted in "Bahya Jati" who according to the custom of those days were beyond reclamation and could not be purified at all. The degraded and the excommunicated ones and the lowest strata by reason of the accepted notions of those days were sinners, and were unfit for social intercourse and they were treated as untouchables detested and shunned.

LAPSE OF DHARMA

The Varnasrama Dharma by the very rigid rules it imposed on its castes was bound to become unworkable. The rules were more honoured in the breach than by the observance. Changes of time, influx of new races, advent of new dynasties and new political and social standards of life were bound to have their effects on the system. The social organisation out-grew the rules and the Varnasrama Dharma as originally conceived and practised became obsolete. The substance disappeared but the form remained. The old rules of purity and pollution are no longer accepted or observed. The original sanctions of the Varnasramadharma had themselves become impotent. The social boycott and excommunication had lost their power. The city has claimed into its fold 'Sanathanists' who have broken every canon of Varnasrama Dharma. While the Varnasrama Dharma has changed beyond recognition and some of the customs that are prevalent in the mater of prohibited degrees of marriage and food clearly transgress the law. The very current law has changed and reacted on the Varnasrama Dharama in its turn.

CHANGE IN LAW

It is no longer the Parishat of pious and learned Brahmins that expounds the law but His Majesty's Court of law. It is no longer the smrithis that are enforced but the sections of the Penal Code. Their Lordships of the Privy Council have laid down and the Varnasramities have acquiesced in the definition that "A person who is born a Hindu and has not renounced the Hindu religion does not cease to be a Hindu merely because he departs from the standard of orthodoxy in matters of diet and ceremonial observances or because he becomes a member of the Brahmo-Samaj." The caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850 has negatived the Varnasrama rule depriving a person of rights, property and inheritance if he renounces his religion, or excluded from the communion of his religion or is deprived of his caste. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act 1856 has legalised the remarriage of Hindu Widows prohibited by sastras as sinful. The Indian Succession Act has changed many matters affecting the Hindu. The Native Converts Marri-

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of marriage, divorce and adoption. The Guardians and Wards Act 1890 applies to the Hindus when a guardian has to be appointed by the court.

The Transfer of Property Act and the Contract Act have superseded the ancient shastras in matters of Land rights and contracts. The Civil and Criminal Procedures and the Evidence Act have taken the place of the Smruthi Codes. The Indian Penal Code has penalised many of the things that are sanctioned by the Smruthies. The Sathi is now a heinous offence and a Hindu can no longer enforce some of the cruel penances of the Prayaschitah Kanda.

Even the rights of the Gods have been interfered with by the Hindu Religious Endowment Act. Last but not the least, the Sarda Act prohibits the Child Marriages sanctioned by the Sastras and legalises the post puberi marriage penalised by the Smruthies, Varnasrama Dharma! Where are you drifting?

CHANGES OF A CENTURY

All this is happening for over a century and yet we Sanathanists very effectively shut our eyes to these things and say nothing has occured to reform our society. History tells us that many wild tribes and foreign clans have been accepted into the fold and given a caste. Their power or money has enabled them to extort from the priesthood recognition of their status, some ancient text whose meaning was supposed to have been misunderstood till then is unearthed, interpreted according to the required meaning. The clan or tribe is identified with some old name in the shastras or some shastric fiction is found or finally some fictitious origin is woven to reconcile the contradiction or foolishness of the shastra. Many unknown persons were able to get into high Kshatriya castes by their influence, the simple and convenient test resorted to being whether Brahmanas officiate at the ceremonies in the family or not. At a time when the Brahmins had left the Vedic Law of Non-possession and grabbed at wealth this test was easy and convenient for both. Even today Pandits are found who can cleverly do all these things. The greatest example of the power of the rupee and the change of times is found in the matter of degradation for transgression of Dharma. The original ideas of sin and pollution having gone, and along with it have gone the strict observance or enforcement of the Prayaschitta Kanda. The terrible penances for expiation of the sin have been watered down into very light apologies of purification ceremonies, which are some times reduced into the convenient practice of giving a few rupees to a Brahmana. But people have become wiser and they no longer reveal their sins and no longer resort to the priests for purification ceremonies. Men shut their eyes to transgression of rules. No Parishats are presiding. The social

ALMIGHTY RUPEE

Your money is able to attract men who would have shunned you as a Pathitha and there is no necessity for a sinner to be afraid. Where is the Pathitha? Who, I ask you, are the persons degraded and outcast? The progeny of sin who are to be weeded out from society remain undetected or are tolerated in the society itself. The Chandala, son of a Sudra by a Brahmin woman is no longer out-casted by the society as effectively as of old. Who identifies and registers the origin of all the births now? The Registrar at least does not. Public opinion does not go far enough. The society merely whispers some rumour but does not go beyond that. Who is to expound and enforce the laws of the Dharma? No Brahmin can claim to satisfy the Manu Dharma Shastra and say he is the man. There is absolutely no sanction to enforce the rules. The Smruthies have become obsolete except for purposes of quoting in academic discussions. Varnashrama Dharma has become a dead fossil buried deep some years back. Every thing has changed but the social tyranny in the matter of the untouchable alone remains. You quote the scipture and say it must remain. But you cannot connect the present depressed classes to the untouchables of olden days nor can you prove that you are a true member of the Varnasrama whose acts of Dharma are defiled by contact with the low and the barbarous. You cannot have the cake and eat it too.

A WARNING

You say that the socalled untouchables are unclean as they carry on menial services. Nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so. You do not call a doctor an untouchable for doing much more unclean things to save your life. As for their present lot, it is your society that has tyrannised them into it. You cannot point out their low occupations as evidence of untouchability. As a matter of fact the Smruthi Chandrika quotes Narada who says that our ancient Hindus had a system of slavery. Fifteen kinds of slaves are mentioned. They did the work of scavenging excreta, removing filth, and sweeping the threshold. Narada did not say these were untouchables. On the other hand Narada says that slaves could be freed by the kindness of the master. Is it not a way out of our present difficulty?

The Harijans do not want to interfere with the private rights of individuals or classes. They want equality in public conveniences. They want the total removal of the unnatural law of pollution by sight, touch and speech. A society which admits nationals who do not believe in the Hindu gods or scriptures and who do not observe the canons of Hindu cleanliness to social intercourse and even to the temples as honoured guests cannot afford to deny justice to seven crores of fellow beings who live with you, feel with you and die with you. If you do not do this freely, at

10 WEDNESDAY

Awake, arise and do the right
thing now in glory to India! That
has produced a Gandhi whose
like we have can be counted on
the fingers of a person to the people of
the [illegible] Bharata Srama Dharma

Sundays News
1939

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now and glory to India ~~be~~ that has produced a Gandhi whose rule of life can be unto you what that of the sages was to the people of the ages of Varnasrama Dharma.